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## In Defense of Dharma: Just-war Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka

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# Review of *In Defense of Dharma: Just-war Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka*

Annewieke Vroom<sup>\*</sup>

*In Defense of Dharma: Just-war Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka.* By  
Tessa J. Bartholomeusz. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002, 209  
pages, ISBN 0700716823 (paper).

The relevance of the theme discussed in Tessa Bartholomeusz's book, *In Defense of Dharma: Just-war Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka*, hardly needs explanation. The author explores the religious dimension of the ethnic strife in Sri Lanka, where since the first (1983) bombing of the Kandy temple holding the Buddha's Tooth Relic, national symbol of 'Buddhist Sri Lanka', 60,000 people have lost their lives. (p. xxi) Bartholomeusz researches the Buddhist side of the conflict, and shows that many Sinhalese Buddhists active in the public domain have promoted a "Buddhist fundamentalism" (p. 34) that has contributed to the polarization of religious (and ethnic) groups in Sri Lanka. One wonders how Buddhists relate such an attitude to the supposedly fundamental Buddhist spirit of *ahimsa* or non-violence. Bartholomeusz's book provides an abundance of material on exactly this question: how have Sri Lankan Buddhists "justified their resort to violence and why?" (p. xxi)

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## Religion and state

In Chapter 1, "Narrative, Ethics and War," Bartholomeusz follows Stanley Hauerwas's approach to ethics, focusing on the power of religious narratives to shape individual moral decisions. She finds his approach highly appropriate for Sri Lanka, where she finds religious stories take a prominent place in public debate due to a type of "Buddhist secularism" that interweaves religion and politics. (pp. 5-7) In Sri Lanka, it is the task of politicians to actively "foster religion"—in this case, mainly the religion to which the 70 percent majority belongs: Buddhism. (pp. 6-7) While the democratic socialist republic of Sri Lanka holds to the principle of freedom of religion, its most recent constitution still grants Buddhism "the foremost place" among religions. This is symbolically underlined when after elections politicians ask blessings of all religions—after extensively visiting the Buddhist *Dalada* (Tooth Relic) shrine first. That mixing religion and politics holds consequences for minority religions is no surprise. However, one might hold certain hope in the case where the majority religion concerned is a (still highly monastic) Buddhism. Focusing on the approach to just-war, Bartholomeusz argues that in so far as there is tension between the *sangha* and the state, it is the *sangha* that is more supportive of violence. (p. 8).

An example of this dates back twenty-five years before the *Dalada* bombing, when then prime minister Bandaranaike proposed a policy somewhat accomodating to the Tamil minority. Earlier, he had campaigned on a "Sinhala-only" policy backed by the Buddhist leadership. His shift "enraged many monks and laity alike." (p. 13) and three years later the prime minister was killed by an angry monk, "ostensibly for complying with some Tamil demands." (p. 13) In a more recent (1997) example of *sangha*-state conflict, Prime Minister Kumaratunga reportedly sneered in reaction to an influential pro-war monk (Sobitha) that "if the monks want war, she would send them to the warfront." (p. 150) (This irritation is even more remarkable when we consider this prime minister herself speaks of "war for peace").

### Nationalist stories

In chapter two, "Just-war Thinking in Texts and Contexts," Bartholomeusz describes what narratives are used to justify Buddhist violence. The major culprit here is the post-canonical scripture the *Mahavamsa* (Great History). In this text kings and forefathers defend the country from "external influences" after the Buddha himself makes three magical trips to Sri Lanka, which he prepares to be the *dharmadwipa* (island of the dharma). "[T]he *Mahavamsa* occupies the same position in Sinhala society that the *Ramayana* holds in Indian society." Bartholomeusz quotes Steven Kemper on the importance of this text: "As children, they hear shreds and patches of the tradition recited, they see temple paintings evoking it, or they follow cartoons in Sinhala newspapers representing the lives of righteous kings." (pp. 20-21) Thus Bartholomeusz portrays the background of the Sri Lankan Buddhist perception of the island: stories that present the island as destined to be Buddhist.

### Really Buddhist

Sri Lankan Buddhist religio-nationalism is supported by the monks who are understood to have the task to safeguard the "Dharma-Island" from threat by "foreign influences" such as the Tamils. In support of this nationalist worldview, many texts are quoted that paint the history of the island as one of heroic warrior kings who (violently) "defend" the country from *damilas* (now read as Tamils) (chapter three: "*Dharma yuddhaya* and Dharma Warriors in Sri Lanka"). Even though most of the quoted texts are post-canonical, Bartholomeusz stresses as in earlier publications that it is naive to explain *dharmayuddhaya* (religious/dharma-war) thinking as a post-Theravāda development, a Sri Lankan aberration, or for other reasons not "truly Buddhist." (p. 66) She locates the seeds for violence in canonical Buddhist texts such as the *Dhammapada*, that are "replete with military metaphors." (p. 41)

Furthermore, just-war thought is not merely on the periphery of Sri Lankan Buddhism. Rather, "the idea of war, endorsed by monks and legitimated by the vamsas, has become part of the fabric of contemporary Buddhism in Sri Lanka." As a vivid witness to this, Bartholomeusz describes a *sangha* of political monks that nowadays take their refuge vows in "*rata, jatiya, agama* or country, nation/race, religion," instead of the traditional and more all-inclusive *Buddha, Dhamma*, and *Sangha*. (p. 69)

The religio-nationalistic discourse is strengthened by the physical presence of relics in Sri Lanka, the holiness of which raise the island to an almost divine status, so much that "the island is the functional equivalent of a relic of use, and ... thus serves as the living presence of the Buddha" (p. 144), who due to the account of his magical visits is believed to have elected exactly these 65,610 square kilometers of land in the Indian Ocean for his religion to thrive.

### **Pacifism itself legitimizing violence**

The kind of Buddhism that the Sinhalese discourse hopes to uphold Bartholomeusz notes to be radically pacifist (chapter four: "Buddhism, Pacifism, War, and Ethical orientations"). Bartholomeusz argues the Sri Lankan Buddhist belief in pacifism itself is a major factor contributing to a fundamentalist attitude among Buddhists in Sri Lanka. For, according to Bartholomeusz, Sri Lankan Buddhists have come to believe that pacifism (based on *ahimsa*) is a *unique* possession of the Buddhist religion. The dogma of the unique Buddhist pacifism is sustained by drawing the contrast to Christianity and (to a lesser extent) Islam, which are demonized as violent religions. (pp. 103, 110) (It seems to Hinduism there is a more ambiguous attitude (cf. p. 74 vs. pp. 2, 165)). English-speaking Buddhists worldwide in their publications have "created an ideological community that accepted the superiority of Buddhism to Christianity." (p. 106) This "construction of a pacific Buddhism" creates the idea of an utopia of a peaceful non-violent society dependent on Buddhism alone. (p. 110) From this assumption, the crucial consequence is drawn that violence is allowed for in cases where the

peace-bringing Buddhist religion is perceived to be threatened, i.e., within Sri Lanka itself. Also from here it is a small step to the call for assimilation of minority groups to Buddhism. (p. 115)

Interestingly, Bartholomeusz refers to an interview by Tibetan Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman with the Dalai Lama, who in response to a question on Sri Lanka says: "[I]f the situation was such that there was only one learned lama or genuine practitioner alive, a person whose death would cause the whole of Tibet to lose all hope of keeping its Buddhist way of life, then it is conceivable that in order to protect that one person it might be justified for one or ten enemies to be eliminated—if there was no other way. I could justify violence only in this extreme case, to save the last living knowledge of Buddhism itself." (p. 29) Of course, in Sri Lanka we are not at all speaking about saving the last living knowledge of Buddhism, but rather about saving the myth of Sri Lanka as a fully-Buddhist island.

In chapter five, "Sri Lankan Buddhism and Just-war Thinking Revisited," once more Bartholomeusz calls to the stage examples from the bewildering array of monks, politicians, journalists, scientists, poets, songwriters, laypeople and *sangha* council members who justify or even glorify (p. 91) violence, evoking variations on the theme of Sri Lanka as a sacred Buddhist island.

### Evaluation

Bartholomeusz draws a lively image of what is actually going on the Buddhist side of the ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka. At the same time, the plentitude and diversity of people and texts cited leave it difficult to distinguish the main lines of thought and to assess to what extent the quoted materials are representative of Sri Lankan Buddhism as a whole. Bartholomeusz suggests that the material quoted in *In Defense of Dharma: Just-war Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* is quite representative of Sri Lankan Buddhism—to the frustration of smaller and more minority-friendly Buddhist groups.

The author herself, who sadly died before she could finish the book, found her book repetitive in parts and thought there were places where the argument still needed refinement (p. xv)—a justified self-critique. One can, however, appreciate the book for its vast amount of material, for its associative crisscrossing through Sri Lanka's past and present, and for its comparisons, observations and connections. The many connections Bartholomeusz makes in her book will need to be systematised by other researchers. One hopes Bartholomeusz's overwhelming amount of evidence pointing to the centrality of violence in Sri Lankan Buddhism will serve as an incentive to do so, and perhaps also create a new awareness among those Sinhalese Buddhists that, as Bartholomeusz contends, have thus far been unable to see the extent and danger of their pro-violence attitudes.